

Former Jamaican bobsledder speaks of overcoming fears

By Michael Heckman, Sentinel Staff

The United States has never invaded Jamaica "...because coconuts make very good missiles," guest speaker Devon Harris told an audience of about 150 Soldiers and civilians Tuesday morning during his address, "The Quest for Black Citizenship in the Americas," at Club Hood.



Harris' serious but humor-punctuated delivery was part of a program sponsored by III Corps and the 36th Engineer Brigade during African-American History Month.

When approached in 1986 about becoming a member of a proposed Jamaican Olympic bobsled team, Harris, a former high school track star, had completed officer training school at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, England.

He often has said he thought it was the most ridiculous idea he ever heard.

At the time his personal goals included qualifying as a sprinter for the upcoming Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea, in 1988.

But his colonel at the school, Alan Douglas, told him to go to the bobsled team trials.

Before Harris' speech, a short clip from "Cool Runnings," a movie about the Jamaican bobsled team, showed Harris and other members of the team crashing on the run in the Winter Olympics in Calgary, Canada, where parts of the movie were filmed five years later.

Of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of racial equality in American, Harris said, "It hasn't been realized 100 percent but we've come a long way."

So has Harris.

While introducing him, Col. Kent Savre, 36th Eng. Bde. Commander, said of Harris "He rose from the Jamaican slums to attend the military academy at Sandhurst....and became a three-time Olympian."

Harris is "...truly a testament to one man's refusal to accept the limitations placed upon him by birth or society...

“His positive attitude,” Savre added, “led him to found “Keep on Pushing” to bring hope to kids in disadvantaged communities throughout the world, author the motivational children’s book, “Yes I Can,” and to work with Right to Play, an initiative that uses sports and play in refugee camps worldwide to advance child development.”

Life lessons he has learned, Harris said, include: courage defeats fear; don’t allow fear to dominate your life; and inspire others by overcoming your fears.

As did King, Harris sees himself as a dreamer who accomplishes things with vision.

“Our dreams and visions create our future; don’t ever let anyone tell you who you are or what you can do,” Harris said.

He urged people to “Look into the mirror and define yourself.”

Despite negative expectations from others, Harris said he and his bobsled teammates “Didn’t just see ourselves as a bunch of Jamaican gangas who smoked weed but as world-class bobsledders who could become Olympic champions.”

Before presenting Harris with a certificate of appreciation, Lt. Gen. Rick Lynch, III Corps and Fort Hood commander, echoed Harris’ advice about developing a positive self-image

“We all have to come together on how we can improve ourselves, our nation and the Army,” Lynch said.

“We identify ourselves as Soldiers and celebrate our diversity. We don’t identify ourselves as Black Soldiers or red Soldiers or white Soldiers,” he added.

Focusing on Black History Month, Lynch said, “We have an opportunity as a nation. We have magnificent Soldiers in our Army, some of whom happen to be black. We’ve come a long ways in the past four decades.”

Lynch cited four-star General William “Kip” Ward, commander of the U.S. Africa Command and, at Fort Hood commanders, command sergeants major and Brig. Gen. Vincent K. Brooks, his deputy commanding general, as evidence of the Army’s progress in achieving equal opportunity for Soldiers.